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PINKER, Steven. Guia de escrita; como conceber um texto com clareza, precisão e elegância [The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century][1]. Tradução de Rodolfo Ilari. São Paulo: Contexto, 2016. 252 p.

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[1] TN. This review is about the book translated into Portuguese and published in Brazil in 2016. The original work was published in English in 2014 and its full reference is: PINKER, S. The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century. New York: Penguin, 2014.

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Some books should not be reviewed. This is one of them, not because it does not deserve to be presented to a readership of experts or otherwise, but because it is preceded by the translator's prologue, which could well serve as a review. It is probably because of a business issue that it is not published here, as if it were now another genre. But as readers will only know the prologue if they have the book in hand, let this review also work as an advertisement of it.

The book title [in the Portuguese translation] can be deceiving, because it resonates other works that are out there and promise a textual heaven with tips such as "be brief, clear and original."[2]

Now, to a certain extent this is what this book is about, but its fundamentals are not simple; they do not appeal to an act of will or a decision to be made on the day of writing. The most interesting feature in the work are the explanations, once the "facts" are known. In the next lines of this review, I provide a brief note on each chapter.

The prologue is first a defense of the living language, much opposed by authors of style manuals (a curiosity is the quotation of six authors concerned with the decline of languages that repeat the same discourse in 1785, 1883, 1889, 1917, 1961, 1978). Secondly, it is an elegy to beauty, which comes after Pinker's claim that having style brings confidence. Perhaps it is due to a certain difficulty (unfamiliarity?) with writing that many people say that everything is ready and done and that it is "only necessary to write something down" ... Pinker can help them.

The first chapter is, in its turn, a defense of stylistic learning. Its motto is "No one is born with skills in English composition per se." Those skills are an outcome of several factors, including the writing of good authors (if you do not read them, you can give up writing well). But Pinker does not advocate that everything stems from familiarity, which would fuel an intuition arising from immersion. He analyzes a set of short passages that he considers examples of good writing, and explains (we will show why further on) what makes them exemplary in detail. He argues that this type of analysis leads a writer to master writing with clarity, accuracy and style. In other words, the knowledge of the language resources contributes to writing improvement. There is

[2] TN. The author is analyzing the title of the translation published in Brazil, which could be literally translated as "Writing Handbook: How to Produce a Text with Clarity, Accuracy and Style".

something of taste and predilection in a writer's choices and analyses, but there is clearly more explicitness of the ingredients that the good writer must take into consideration. This means that he/she manipulates them consciously.

The second chapter revisits some famous manuals that bring theses that are correct but little explained, always followed by well-known prejudices (such as the ones that criticize the writings found on the internet based on mere purism, failing to realize not only that languages change, but especially that the internet is integrating much of humanity into the world of writing). It also refers to strange lessons in the manuals, such as recommendations on not using the passive voice, followed by one...

Futhermore, the second chapter defends a rather interesting thesis: to write is to show the world. That is, it is not a relation between (the author's or the reader's) language and thought, which would, for example, require clear ideas, but the possibility of "showing the world," which more clearly implies "words and things" (without any naivety). It also strongly implies the reader, because it is about showing him/her the world. This is how the success of the text is measured. Descartes (*Discourse on Method* could undoubtedly be read like a model of writing) and La Rochefoucauld would be the models: curiously, two French authors. Perhaps it is no wonder the ideology of clarity of the French (as Lacan can tell!) has made a fortune ... Examples are: instead of "Prevention of neurogenesis diminished social avoidance," state "When we prevented neurogenesis, the mice no longer avoided other mice." Or instead of "It may be that some missing genes are more contributive to the spatial deficit," write "Perhaps some missing genes contribute to the spatial deficit" (PINKER, 2014, p.50).

The third chapter foregrounds another issue that may be considered old, but is approached in a fresh manner. The reader is usually blamed for the incomprehension of the texts, but Pinker shows that this is often the author's fault. It is not because the author is (even when it is the case) unaware or has little knowledge of writing, in the traditional sense. The failure has to do with the fact that the author does not "choose" his reader, does not take into account his universe - his memory or his knowledge of the world, according to theory. Thus, he suppresses assumptions, always beginning *in media res* or in the wrong part. It is not that the reader does not understand the sentences or the language or even does not realize what it is about: he/she just cannot relate what he/she reads to his/her previous knowledge. We all go through this: be it in a

query to the computer problem solver, who soon asks us about details of the operating systems; be it in a conversation with lawyers who ask about alternatives in the contract (Are there alternatives?); be it regarding the speech of a physicist who thinks everyone knows what quantum is ... (Incidentally, it is one of the phenomena that is parallel to this issue. Although Pinker does not address it, this is exactly how much - no pun intended - a reader might think he/she is modern because of his/her quantum diet). Pinker refers to the result of a mismatch between text and reader, because of the author, as the "curse of knowledge." It is clear that one can complain of Pinker, thinking that he is stating that the author should always put himself/herself at the level of the reader, forgetting that the reader addressed by a text is different from the empirical reader, that the reader should change texts when he/she cannot read it properly. But Pinker is consistent, whether one agrees with him or not: he thinks writing is showing the world, not assuming that the reader has an X-ray vision...

The following chapter (if I keep using "following," I can achieve something in terms of style if repetition is considered a flaw, but the reader loses because he/she will have to go back to find its precise place in the book, unless he/she has good memory[3]; would it be better to say "fourth chapter"?) is of interest perhaps more to linguists, especially syntacticians. Pinker takes into consideration many cases that could be qualified as ambiguous, but the problem is not to describe the ambiguity, especially that arising from the possibility that constituents occupy alternative nodes in a tree. The problem is to show how this can present the world to the reader in an obscure way. That is, it is not describing the possibilities of displacements, but the effect they produce. It is not describing a property of the syntax, but drawing consequences from it in favor of clarity. He does what he says and proves it – on the tree. Everybody has learned at school (at least in the past) that phrases like "pentes para mulheres de osso" ["combs for bone women" or "bone combs for women"] are vicious, but they never told us that there was a syntactic theory that explained it (and neither does Pinker). Better yet: they could explain to us that if we want to be clear, to save the reader's energy, we should say "bone combs for women" because "bone" qualifies combs (in the world!!), because the expression is contiguous to the name to which it refers, and contiguity is relevant. Therefore, if we say "pentes para mulheres de osso" ["combs for bone women" or

[3] Pinker would probably disapprove of everything in parentheses...

“bone combs for women”], it may happen, as a contiguity effect, that we imagine bone women. This is what Pinker has overlooked, and it can be great if we want to make jokes... because, as we all know, they crucially depend on surprising senses, which do not need to show the world - or at least the same world. Pinker’s best example, also a bit funny, is “a panel on sex with four professors.” Pinker organizes the sentence constituents in a tree (below I only show the essential):

[a pannel] [on sex with four professors].

and

[a pannel with four professors] [on sex].

“With four professors” is a sequence that can be related to sex or pannel, depending on the contiguity. Each phrase shows a different world. At least at first sight. Choose the world you want to show and add “with four professors” in the most appropriate place for your purpose.

The fifth and last chapter, entitled “Arcs of Coherence,” as the title indicates, is about coherence (in the current sense of text linguistics), but since it is about clarity and style, the reader will soon realize that, similar to the previous chapter, it is about showing the world. That is: the issue is clarity. In this chapter, the texts analyzed are more extensive, which makes it difficult to present them on a review, but some examples show what it is: without losing sight of what could be called macro-structures, it is in the micro-level that the book insists the most.

For example, it recommends avoiding sentences such as “My mother wants to have the dog’s tail operated on again, and if it doesn’t heal this time, she’ll have to be put away,” in which the last “she” can evoke the mother; it is better to repeat “the dog.” The same can be observed in “Guilt, vengeance and bitterness can be emotionally destructive to you and your children. You must get rid of them.” There is certainly a set of reasons that will lead one to interpret “them” as reassigning the three feelings listed at the beginning of the sentence, not “your children.” But it is true that the world seems a bit opaque here. The difference between these examples and those of syntax, when the matter is the position of a constituent, adjacent or not to an element to which it refers, is that it is the structure of the language – and here we are on the other level, that of the Text (an issue never quite resolved, although the distinction seems obvious). Let it be clear that Pinker does not neglect the macro-structures. As I mentioned before, it would

take a lot of space to expose some of Pinker's analyses, which are diverse and very interesting. And the reading of the book would be dispensable, which is the opposite of what the goal of a review is.

In the prologue, the translator warns the reader that the last chapter has not been translated. It deals with correction. The main virtue of the chapter, according to Ilari, is that it calls into question the criteria of correction, often purist or nostalgic. A subject that, I would say, we know well. Not that things are clear to everyone, because it is during correction that heads roll (whether in the ENEM,[4] or in college admission exams, or in schools). In a way, the chapter is missing. However, the reader, if he/she looks for it, will find good replacements in Brazil.

The book is a manual to academic, journalistic and propaganda writing. Certainly, it is not intended to be a guide to write poetry or humor. These are things you may not learn "at school," although in some cases you just have to turn the key.

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[4] NT. Enem (Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio) is a non-mandatory and standardized Brazilian national exam that evaluates high school students in Brazil. In addition, it has been used as an admission test for enrollment in many federal universities and educational institutes since 2009.